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ABSTRACT

Using a theoretical conceptualization of friendship as a context for development, this study evaluated modifications of standard sociometric procedures to assess friendship. A culturally diverse sample of 237 children in grades 3 through 6 completed two sociometric nominations over a 1-month period and rated the quality of their best friendship and their social competence. Sociometric nominations involved children's degree of friendship with their classmates; nominations were coded for mutuality and for stability of mutuality over the 1-month period. From the results of the study, it is concluded that: (1) the rates of stability of friendship observed were comparable to those reported in studies using standard sociometric techniques; (2) the techniques in this study permitted identification of good friendships; and (3) the assessment of short-term stability of mutuality of friendship enhanced the prediction of social competence, beyond the level achieved by the assessment of mutuality of friendship alone. (MM)

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Improving Sociometric Methods for Defining Friendship

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Abstract

The nature and functions of friendships in middle childhood have been the focus of many recent studies. In the present study, two modifications to commonly used friendship assessment techniques were evaluated. A culturally diverse sample of 237 Grade 3 to 6 children completed sociometric nominations and rated the quality of their best friendship and their social competence. Sociometric evaluations in which children were asked to distinguish best from good friendships yielded meaningful differences in terms of social competence and friendship quality. Assessment of stability of mutual friendship nominations was also found to enhance the validity of sociometric assessments.

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Rationale

Sociometric nominations, in which children are asked to identify their friends, are the most common method of assessing friendships in middle childhood (Price & Ladd, 1986). In this study, two modifications to standard sociometric procedures are evaluated in light of a theoretical conceptualization of friendship as a context for development. Mutuality, helpfulness, intimacy, security, frequent interaction, and equitable conflict resolution are construed as features of friendship that enhance socioemotional development and adjustment.

Aims

1) Determine whether distinctions between best versus good versus unilateral friendships are meaningful.

2) Determine whether assessment of short-term stability of mutuality of friendship nominations increases the predictive power of friendship assessments.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 237 children from Grades 3 to 6 (8 to 12 years of age), evenly distributed across grade and sex.

Children were from lower- to middle-class family backgrounds and from a variety of cultures as indicated by languages used at home (English, 65%; English and French, 16%; English and a language other than French, 16%).

Procedure

Times 1 and 2. Classroom sociometric nominations were done twice, with an interval of one month. Sociometric participation rates were high (n = 371, 90% of children in participating classes), permitting assessment of mutuality of most friendship nominations.

Time 3. One month after Time 2, 237 children (66% of sociometric sample) completed measures of friendship quality and social competence.

Measures

Sociometric Nominations

Children rated their degree of friendship with each same-sex classmate (1 = "best friend", 2 = "good friend", to 5 = "don't know or don't like").

Mutuality was scored for each child at Time 1 and Time 2.

Mutual best: a best friend nomination was reciprocated.

Mutual good: a good friend nomination was reciprocated.

Unilateral: no nomination was reciprocated.

Stability of mutuality from Time 1 to Time 2 was then scored, with three levels: stable mutual best, stable mutual good, and no stable friendships.

Friendship Qualities

The 23-item Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS; Bukowski, Boivin, & Hoza, 1991) was used to assess qualities of the relationship perceived by the child as being his/her best friendship. Two scales were used:

positive qualities: "My friend helps me when I am having

trouble with something"; and

conflict: "I can get into fights with my friend".

Social Competence

The Peer Relations Scale from the Self-Description Questionnaire (Marsh, 1988) was used to assess children's self-perceptions of their social competence (e.g., "I get along with kids easily").

Results

Friendship Prevalence

As shown in Table 1, use of mutuality at Time 2 as the criterion for friendship resulted in 74% of the children having best, 14% good, and 12% unilateral friendships.

The stricter criterion of stability of mutuality resulted in 55% of children having stable best, 21% stable good, and 24% no stable friendships.

Agreement between the two criteria was 74%.

Prediction of Self-ratings of Social Competence

Distinctions between mutual best, mutual good, and unilateral friendships predicted girls' but not boys' social competence (Figure 1 and Table 2).

Stability added to prediction of social competence, and distinctions between stable mutual best, stable mutual good, and no stable friendships predicted social competence for boys and girls (Figure 2 and Table 2).

Friendship Quality as a Function of Relationship Status

On the basis of Time 1 and Time 2 sociometrics, relationships rated on the FQS were classified as being:

stable mutual best (n =60),

stable mutual good (n = 47),

unstable mutual (n = 30), or

unilateral (n = 47) friendships.

Relationship type did not predict children's perceptions of conflict in their friendships.

Relationship type predicted children's ratings of positive friendship

qualities. Stable mutual best friendships were perceived more positively than unilateral, unstable mutual, and stable mutual good friendships, which were perceived similarly (Figure 3 and Table 3).

Conclusions

1) Rates of friendship prevalence observed in this study are comparable to those reported in studies using standard sociometric techniques (Parker & Asher, in press).

2) The technique used in this study permitted identification of good friendships. Girls' social competence differed as a function of involvement in best versus good versus unilateral friendships, and distinctions between stable best, stable good, and no stable friendships predicted both boys' and girls' social competence.

3) Assessment of short-term stability of friendship enhanced prediction of social competence, beyond the level achieved with sociometric mutuality alone.

4) In terms of friendship quality, assessments of stability and degree of friendship were of limited utility. It may be that the measure of friendship quality is not sensitive to differences in the lower ranges of friendship quality.

5) On both validity criteria considered in this study, stable mutual best friendships were superior to other types of friendships.

References

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Table 1

Cross-Classification of Friendship Status Assessed by Mutuality versus Stability of Mutuality (%)

Stability of Mutuality	Mutuality at Time 2 Sociometrics: Unilateral	Mutual Good	Mutual Best	Stability Totals
No Stable Mutual	12	5	7	24
Stable Mutual Good	0	9	12	21
Stable Mutual Best	0	0	55	55
Mutuality Totals	12	14	74	

Table 2

Prediction of Social Competence from Mutuality and Stability of Friendship

Block and Predictors		UBeta	sr	R^2 Change
1.	Sex	-.21^{t}	-.12^{t}	
	Age	0	-.08	.02^{t}
2.	C1: Mutual Best vs. Mutual Good & Unilateral	.30***	.23***	
	C2: Mutual Good vs. Unilateral	.47*	.14*	.07***
3.	C1 by Sex	.42**	.16**	
	C2 by Sex	.91*	.13*	.04**
4.	C3: Stable Mutual Best vs. Stable Mutual Good & No Stable	.32***	.20***	
	C4: Stable Mutual Good vs. No Stable	.38*	.12*	.05**

R^2 = .18

Adjusted R^2 = .15

F (8, 225) = 8.14, p < .0001

^{t}p < .10. $^{*}p$ < .05. $^{**}p$ < .01. $^{***}p$ < .001.

Table 3

Prediction of Positive Friendship Qualities From Type of Relationship Rated

Block and Predictors		UBeta	sr	R^2 Change
1.	Sex	-.24**	.20**	
	Age	0	-.10	.05**
2.	Stable Mutual Best			
	vs. Stable Mutual Good	-.32**	-.20**	
	vs. Unstable Mutual	-.30*	-.17*	
	vs. Unilateral	-.38**	-.23**	.07**

R^2 = .11

Adjusted R^2 = .09

F (5, 178) = 4.59, p < .001

$^{*}p$ < .05. $^{**}p$ < .01.

Figure 1.

Mutuality Status Predicts Girls' but not Boys' Social Competence.

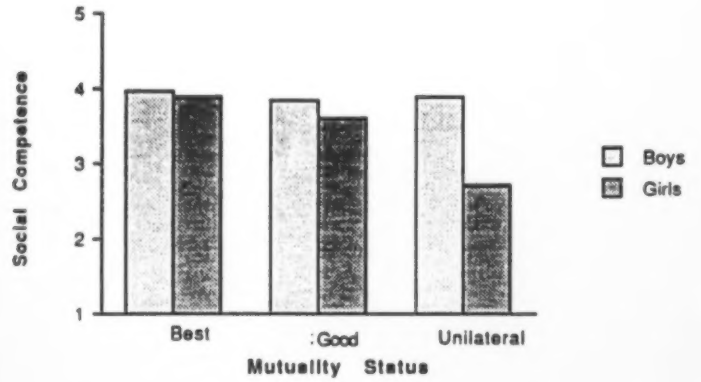

Figure 2.

Stability of Mutuality Predicts Girls' and Boys' Social Competence.

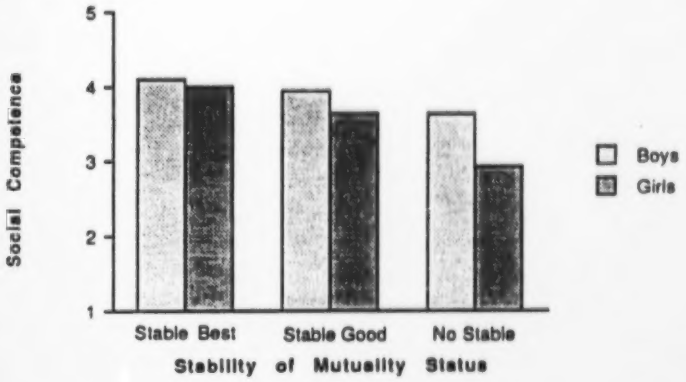

Figure 3. Positive Friendship Qualities as a Function of Relationship Type